

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

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**El Paso Sector Border Patrol Agents Apprehend Suspected Smuggler
Wanted in Connection with Death of Immigrant in New Mexico**

Las Cruces Agents Apprehend Smuggled Group of Migrants Destined for Albuquerque

Las Cruces, New Mexico –Agents with the U.S. Border Patrol, a division of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (BCBP) apprehended a suspected smuggler of illegal migrants wanted in connection with the July 10, 2003 death of a female during a botched illegal crossing in southern Luna County.

Authorities say 28-year old Sarah Lena Montoya, was arrested Friday by Border Patrol agents from the Las Cruces Station for her role in a smuggling scheme that attempted to transport 13 illegal migrants from southern Luna County to Albuquerque via the desert and ultimately NM Highway 26.

“ We believe the time has come for people to realize the reckless consequences of profiting from human smuggling,” said Acting Chief Patrol Agent Michael Moon.

Agents first became suspicious of a Ford pick-up truck on NM Highway 26, near Hatch, New Mexico. The suspicion was based on several factors that related to the vehicle and its occupants. A second vehicle, an Oldsmobile Firenza, was observed following the truck. Agents observed some of its occupants crouching down in the seats as if to avoid being seen.

The pickup truck then pulled over to the side of the road while the Oldsmobile continued on past the agents. These actions prompted agents to make a traffic stop on the sedan. The female driver, later identified as Montoya, said she was a U.S. Citizen. The four passengers in the sedan revealed themselves to be in the United States illegally. The passengers also admitted those being transported in the Ford truck were also part of the group.

Agents then approached the Ford pickup truck where they discovered a mattress in the bed of the truck. Agents found six persons hiding underneath the mattress. They too admitted to being in the U.S. illegally.

The group of 13 illegal migrants were transported back to the traffic checkpoint on NM Highway 185. Further investigation by agents from the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) linked Montoya to a group of immigrants who were smuggled to the U.S. through Columbus, N.M. That incident resulted in the death of a female migrant on July 10, 2003, and the serious injury of a second female migrant who were abandoned when they couldn't keep up with the group.

Investigators have concluded that some of the passengers in the pickup on NM Highway 26 were also part of the group that crossed the border near Columbus that same day. The deceased female, described as a 20-year old woman from Jalisco, Mexico, was dead on arrival at a Deming hospital after being located and transported by a Joint Task Force Six military helicopter from the desert.

According to legal documents, Montoya is considered the principal smuggler in the case. The documents also indicate that Montoya was an active member in the criminal scheme that ultimately resulted in the death of the female migrant near Columbus.

The case was turned over to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Las Cruces for disposition. Upon conviction, Montoya could receive the death penalty under current sentencing guidelines for alien smuggling. She remains in federal custody in Las Cruces pending trial.

Through July 15, 2003, El Paso Sector recorded a total of five (5) deaths of suspected illegal immigrants. That number represents a decrease of 17-percent over this same time period last year. Agents have also made a total of 63 rescues of illegal immigrants in Fiscal Year 2003 to date, including rescues made in desert areas, waterways, freight trains and mountainous areas.

The Border Patrol was transferred from the former INS and became a division of Customs and Border Protection on March 1, 2003. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is a new agency within the Department of Homeland Security's Border and Transportation Security Directorate.

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